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ABSTRACT

Schools cannot change the language of children; the entire social structure is involved, particularly our patterns of social mobility and the values of lower class culture. At the early elementary level, children should be encouraged to use their own language to the fullest extent. Reading instruction for these youngsters should concern characters and experiences they can identify with. Having readers in the dialect may only further confuse the reading process. Standard English-as-a-second-dialect is a definite asset in our society but kindergarten or even earlier is not the place for drill to start. There has to be desire and inward motivation on the part of the individual to switch his/her dialect. Until a youngster is old enough to reason and conceptualize the consequences involved in either acquiring or not acquiring the standard dialect, drill per se is a worthless endeavor on the part of the elementary school teacher. (Author/VM)

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"Reading is Whose Speech Written Down?"

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Numerous writers suggest that the greatest obstacle to the "deprived" individuals creative potential is his "verbal inadequacy." Outside his peer or community group, he has "enormous difficulties" with verbal expression. In school, however, verbalization is held in high esteem. Children who have "problems" communicating in the school setting are characterized as inarticulate or nonverbal.

However, I am suggesting that schools cannot change the language of children; the entire social structure is involved, particularly our patterns of social mobility and the values of lower class culture. It is apparent that educational institutions do an efficient job of turning kids off mentally and verbally. We do need to re-examine the dehumanizing methods perpetrated daily upon youngsters in the name of "Social Mobility," and I might add, by sincere and well meaning teachers.

If we really believe what we say about meeting the needs of the individual child and accepting kids where they are--then why do we insist that children change their language for the teacher. Language is mans' most personal possession. It's a part of him and who he is. Why, then, can't society make some changes toward respecting an individual and his language.

Less that a year ago a college student said to me--"Miss Cox, don't kids have to learn to talk like us (us being White) to get ahead?" My answer to that was--"I hope not," but I'm aware of the social myth and pressures --: "talk like us and get ahead" but it really goes much deeper than that and today's Black youth have given sufficient evidence that many deliberately reject "White Talk."
As one author wrote:

"Americans speak many dialects, but tend to downgrade the folk speech of Negroes and disadvantaged white migrants. . . Young people who leave school with

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this dialect as their only language do not start their working lives on an equal footing with their contemporaries who speak 'standard' American English."(1) Helping youngsters learn the kind of American English that is acceptable in the business world is in demand. The author used her own technique which she described as a personalized adaptation of the audiolingual methods, which uses linguistic concepts. Linguist did not all approve of her technique because some say that dialect is not a speech deficiency, but merely a difference. Some Blacks have resented what they feel to be pointing the finger at a group of people rather than at an educational problem.

"Speech habits are learned, and old habits can be exchanged for new ones."(1)

I think a person should be given the opportunity to be socially mobile in his use of language so that he can shift to the style or dialect that is most effective for the given circumstances.

"The dialect of Negroes and disadvantaged white migrants may be structurally interesting. But these dialects have too long been associated with humble stations, and patterns of low achievement."(1)

Via way of records this method proved quite successful with the volunteer high school pupils with whom she worked. In less than two years the author received federal funds to do a similar project with pre-school and early elementary school youngsters. Unfortunately these youngsters had no choice in the matter.

At the early elementary level we should be encouraging youngsters to use "their" own language to the fullest extent providing experiences to add to it and enrichen, but not methods aimed at deliberate eradication. But too often as kids enter school, self appointed 'Apostles' of Standard English choose to teach these little people "the right way" to speak. And mind you, without taking into account that these same youngsters have been speaking and communicating to others 3-4 years before entering kindergarten.

I'd like for you to take a few second and consider these following questions:

1. What is the correlation between ones' speech and the Reading Process?

2. Does a youngster have to disregard his language—his mother tongue—and learn "standard english" to be a successful reader?

3. Or could it be that teachers want children to have a certain vocabulary to deal with structured readings and Language Materials?
   But couldn't this be accomplished by building on the experiences, concepts, and language the child brings to school; expanding his vocabulary and experiences by adding <u>onto</u> rather than asking a youngster to abandon or eradicate his previous existence, family and self?

Ammons and Ammons[2] compared the affects of training young Black children in vocabulary verses sentence structure construction to find out which methodology would result in greater transfer to other areas of language performance. Their findings suggest that time devoted to language training for young Black children is better spent on vocabulary than on sentence construction.

If we really accept the whole child then we accept his language too. If publishers want to rewrite primers and basal textbooks fine! For the most part, they aren't real language anyway. Readers should be about characters and experiences youngsters can identify with. <u>But</u> do we have to write these books in dialect? Black youngsters have shown that they can translate sterile stories into their own dialect—so why further confuse the reading process.

Examples:

> The research being done in Detroit, at the Reading Miscue Research Center.[3] While the Black dialect primers developed by Baratz and Stewart might be more confusing than helpful.[4]

If a youngsters speech does not conform to the teachers concept of standard or proper english, the youngster is corrected, sometimes ostracized and even ignored by the teacher in hopes of shaping the child into using the "prestige dialect" or "good talk." But much too often reading time, particularly oral reading, is the time teachers use for diction, speech correction, word study drill etc. Here the teacher is working against the child and interferring with comprehension—which is really what reading is.

Examples:

1. A teacher stops a child in the middle of a sentence to have him reproduce the word "Four" as she pronounces it rather than "Foe" (or facsimile) as the student pronounces it in his dialect.

2. Poor oral readers don't always get a chance to show their high level of comprehension.

3. Sometimes, proficient oral readers have low comprehension.

One noted linguist stated that "Words one is accustomed to meeting only in print and frequently mispronounced in oral reading" gives reasonable supposition that they will be frequently misapprehended in silent reading. This statement is a reasonable supposition but only a supposition. For in a recent study a youngster was reading a story and the word "typical" came up; the youngster pronounced "type-cal," and "topical" but at the end of the story was able to define the word as meaning "very ordinary"or "an everyday kind of thing."(3)

Standard english as a second dialect is a definite asset in our society but I don't feel Kindergarten or earlier is the place for drill to start, especially when standard is used as a vehicle or reading and hence introduction to the values of middle class culture. I feel that even children will select those values which suit their immediate needs, therefore suggestions of cramming middle class values down the throats of kindergarteners might well be ignored. For trying to show the social significance of standard to a kindergartener is a waste of time. How do you tell a kindergartener, playing in the sandbox, or pulling a wagon, it's important to learn standard to better his chances of getting a job when he's eighteen. There has to be desire and inward motivation on the part of the individual to switch his/her dialect. And until a youngster is old enough to reason and conceptualize the consequences involved in either acquiring or not acquiring the standard dialect--drill per se is a worthless endeavor on the part of the elementary school teacher.

In closing I would like to introduce, very briefly, two new points. Understanding non-verbal communication as used by students in and out of the classroom

setting might be a helpful strategy for the classroom teacher. And those who propose preparing teachers to learn this means of communication might think about: (1) cultural groups use face, eyes, and hands as a means of communicating only with group members, or as a save face mechanism toward non group members. And (2) once the group recognizes that non group members are decoding their messages, they will simply replace old symbols with new ones.

Finally, Spanish and Spanglish versus "Black English".—Much too often the language difficulty that Spanish speaking children experience in learning standard English is equated with Black dialect(s) when really there is no comparison. English is the base language for the majority of Black children here in American, and this is not true for the Spanish speaking child.

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